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Ex-Soviet agent tells strengths, weaknesses of CIA, KGB

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OGDEN — The CIA and KGB possess different strengths and weaknesses, says former KGB officer Vladimir Sakharov, who spoke this week to students at Weber State College.

Sakharov, who now teaches international relations at Arizona State University, said the KGB is strong in personal intelligence gathering, while the CIA is strong in technical and electronic intelligence gathering.

"If I were a KGB officer in the United States and had a quota of agents to recruit here, I would get a job as a used-car salesman in Silicon Valley," Sakharov said.

"I'd sell used BMWs to yuppie executives. When one of those executives came to me to buy a BMW, I'd run a credit check on him through Consumer Data Corp., which would tell me where he works, how much money he makes, his spending habits, his wife's spending habits, where he lives, whether he is overmortgaged, late on his payments and in financial trouble.

"That's a lot of personal information. I can get information on an American about everything that matters to him."

By contrast, difficulties faced by CIA personnel in the Soviet Union are mind-boggling, he said, recalling his years living as a youth in a Moscow condominium complex adjacent to the U.S. Embassy. The uppermost floors of the condominium were reserved for a Soviet surveillance post, which recorded everything that took place in the embassy.

The CIA has been forced by restricted access to Soviet society to rely heavily on satellites and printed material for information, he said.

"Americans have a tendency to buy things sight unseen and to believe stories they haven't experienced first-hand. This is also reflected in American intelligence gathering. The CIA is crazy about electronic intelligence because it's relatively easy. However, interpretation of that data is crucial.

"The CIA is an analytical community. Maybe 90 percent of American intelligence is collected through reading and analyzing publications, newspapers and periodicals, as well as everything available over radio and television channels."

The CIA is weakest in covert, field operations, Sakharov said, simply because the agency hasn't been involved in such activities for a long time. The KGB is not a think-tank. It is an arm of Soviet foreign policy.

"All Soviet intelligence officers are required to study foreign languages. They get 10 percent on top of their monthly salaries for knowledge of English and 15 percent for exotic languages such as Arabic, Chinese, Japanese or Swahili.

"The emphasis at my old alma mater in this country — the University of Southern California — is no longer on learning languages or developing expertise about certain

areas of the world, but on computerized studies of international relations.

"So the student will graduate with knowledge about 1,001 theories and methodologies, but he might not know where Rome, Nigeria or Bangkok are located. Then he'll go to work for the CIA," Sakharov said.

"There was a dispute here when (Yuri) Andropov came to power in the Soviet Union over whether he spoke English or not. I knew Andropov's son, we went to school together. I stated at the time that Andropov knew English. Somebody in 'New Republic' said Andropov couldn't know English because he was a cruel, brutal KGB officer.

"Knowledge of a foreign language by a KGB officer doesn't mean he is sweet and nice. That he drank scotch and read English novels does not mean he wasn't brutal and cruel. It only means he was sophisticated enough to know what makes American society operate and what American interests were.

"When Andropov took over the KGB in 1967, he changed the outlook of the Soviet intelligence officer. He tried to instill a Western mentality into every KGB officer operating overseas," Sakharov said.

"We're dealing with a new generation of Soviet intelligence officers who are not ideologically committed people. They didn't go through the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 or through World War II and know the dangers of war. They are also much more vulnerable to Western culture."

Sakharov recalled visiting the American Industrial Exhibition in Moscow in the late 1950s.

"I saw Cadillacs with shark fins. I also saw a fashion show. I dreamed of walking out of New York's Waldorf-Astoria with two beautiful American models on each arm and driving off into the sunset in my Cadillac."

Sakharov said that was also the dream of other Soviet youths, many of whom are now intelligence officers working overseas. Every KGB agent knows, however, that his promotion depends on his loyalty to the Soviet system.

"He will get his condominium, summer house, boat and car depending on his performance in the bureaucracy."

The problem for the Russian defector, Sakharov said, is that there are too many choices in American society for someone who grew up without them. Sakharov said the worst thing you can do to a Russian is give him a choice.

"He'll go bananas."

A defector, Sakharov said, is usually looked upon by the American people as someone who betrayed his country.

"He is treated in a specific manner. He is debriefed about a year, all his knowledge is pumped from him and then he is given a new name, a monthly stipend or some other subsistence and told to go away — to go settle in Hollywood or someplace.

"Very often the defector might end his life in drunken oblivion, suicide or re-defect, as Yurchenko did."

Of the newest Soviet leader, Sakharov said, "I strongly believe Mikhail Gorbachev imagines himself to be a Soviet John F. Kennedy.